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ABSTRACT

During the first half-century of the existence of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the teaching of grammar aroused furious debate among its members. In 1924, Charles C. Fries assembled a panel of six language scholars to answer three questions: (1) What should English teachers know about the English language? (2) Do the usual college courses in Old English, Chaucer, and historical grammar give prospective English teachers an adequate introduction to the language? and (3) Can linguistic scholarship offer anything practical to teaching correct English? The committee's subsequent statement recommended that English teacher preparation include adequate study of the historical development of English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, but also stated that knowledge of the principles of general linguistics is of greater value than a knowledge of the history of the language. Though officially adopted by NCTE 23 years later, this position called for an about face in teacher preparation, and met massive resistance. As recently as 1961 only a few institutions were graduating prospective teachers with even minimal information about modern language and only a handful required a course in modern English grammar. This polarity between the grammatical rules and the new descriptive statements about language use, together with other language polarities, are expanding and strengthening the awareness of the need for greater sophistication with respect to language theory and its applications in the field of English teaching. (HTH)

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A PERSPECTIVE ON TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Harold B. Allen

It was a rebellion against the university-dominated prescription of the literature to be taught in the schools that in 1911 led to the formation of the National Council of Teachers of English. Yet it is perhaps fair to say that in its more than sixty years the Council has never lost sight of the language in which that literature was written and from which the Council has taken its name--English.

True, the role of the English language in the life of the Council has sometimes been ambiguous and the sight has been dim. At times and to many teachers the language seemed only incidental, a tool like a wrench for tightening loose nuts on the bolts holding correct grammar together. This persistent attitude appeared in the prestigious bulletin produced jointly in 1917 by NCTE and the United States Bureau of Education. Titled Reorganization of English in the Secondary Schools, this bulletin offered the detailed reports of the several committees on literature, composition, business English, and oral expression. There was no committee on the language. There was, I grant, an expressed concern with the sentence and with the parts of speech, but only as subordinate to the topic of composition.

A quite different concept emerged in the 1960's, the proposal that the language is one-third of a tripod, the two other legs of which are composition and literature. But this welcome recognition of language as substantial content I myself have tried to modify. I have argued that since there can be no English literature or English composition without the language, then the English language itself is the solid base upon which the teaching of composition and literature must stand. It is not a non sequitur then to insist that both teachers and students should be provided with sound information about the English language and, indeed, about the nature of language itself.

The need for such sound information has surfaced many times as certain issues and concerns have come to the fore in Council affairs. Let me alphabetize some of the principal ones over the years: bidialectalism, bilingualism, dictionaries and their use, grammar (with respect of what What grammar to teach, How to teach it, and Why teach it all), linguistics as content, regional variation, teacher-training in the English language, usage, and vocabulary acquisition and growth. This list may be enlarged by the addition of applications of language knowledge to the teaching of reading, spelling, composition, and literary criticism.

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The several concerns have always manifested themselves as a series of polarities one pole of which was the status quo. If school teachers in general have been characterized as a conservative force in society, then with respect to the language the teachers of English on all levels have indeed done more than their share to justify that description. A review of the language content of Council publications since 1911 and of the language topics treated in convention programs reveals that proponents of change of any kind on any level could anticipate almost automatic knee-jerking reluctance to accept change, if not wellnigh violent resistance. Outspoken resistance to innovation has generally been strongest in the elementary field, but secondary school English teachers often have been reluctant to forsake the familiar for the new, and among college teachers likewise there are those who follow Pope's caveat against innovation.

During the Council's first half-century the concerns most likely to arouse opposition were those related to the teaching of grammar. Indeed, the first language question raised in the newly-formed Council was : "When we teach grammar, what names shall we use?" At the founding convention, in 1911, Edwin Lewis of Chicago's Lewis Institute said, "It is not necessary for our school grammars to carry a mass of unscientific, factitious, make-believe phraseology, the residue of an obsolete psychology," and he was echoed by C. R. Rourke of Milwaukee with this comment: "At the present time, in twenty-five English texts there are ten different names for the use of good in the sentence He is good and eighteen different names for the use of red in the sentence He painted the barn red." Like all good Americans the participants in this discussion promptly formed a committee. They looked at the terminological confusion and two years later duly and dutifully proposed a uniform nomenclature for textbook writers and classroom use. But the teachers and authors who cherished the dsignation predicate noun declined to be cajoled into using subject complement. And vice versa! The report had little effect.

This issue, after simmering for years, again came to a boil in 1958, when another committee on grammatical terminology held two conferences of textbook authors, linguists, and teachers--one at the convention of the Modern Language Association and one at the NCTE convention. Again the participants refused to agree. So we still have an unnecessary multiplicity of synonyms of grammatical terms in elementary and high school textbooks. Recently a few books have compounded the problem by drawing upon transformational grammar, which describes the predicate nominative, for example, as the NP in the rewriting of the VP component of NP + VP as V + NP when the V is a form of be.

Yet, during those early years at least, the validity of the grammar then taught seems not to have been questioned. Although from 19th century comparative and historical linguistics there already had emerged the great English grammars of Mätzner, Kruisinga, Poutsma,

and Henry Sweet, as well as the first books by Otto Jespersen, the schools clung to their 18th century unrealistic Latinate grammar with its focus upon morphology rather than upon syntax. True, questions were raised about how to teach that grammar, since it was admitted by some that its purpose of attaining correct English had not been universally achieved. In the 1912 convention L. R. Brown of Cleveland opined that the teaching of grammar needed "adjustments," a belief then supported by two speakers who boldly argued that some parts of the grammar could safely be eliminated. But note that they were not arguing for a different grammar. What they wanted was simply to break up the solid block of 150-year old grammar rules by teaching and drilling a particular rule when its violation seemed to demand immediate remedy. Thus began "functional grammar," bits and pieces administered like homeopathic pills for specific ailments. One result, of course, was that students were never given the concept of the language as a complex and coherent system even in terms of traditional grammar. Grammar to them, bluntly, was an incomprehensible mess.

An early hint of rejection of the rigidity of traditional grammar appeared in 1917 in an English Journal article by the Council's first president, Fred Newton Scott. He asserted that American English forms are quite as acceptable as those of British English, and offered the dangerous opinion that actually there is nothing wrong with colloquial English. In 1919 a stronger and direct attack was that in a maverick article by Ella Heaton Pope, who wanted linguistics taught in high school and college--a proposition so bizarre that she felt she had to define linguistics for her readers. Yet, although a year later W. P. Reeves amplified the sound thesis of Scott and Pope, a Council committee report that same year could doggedly insist that a thorough understanding of the grammar--i.e., Latinate grammar--was necessary "to the mastery of the sentence and for the correction of certain errors in accepted grammatical usage." But the defenders of the status quo were beginning to feel besieged when in 1924 one of Scott's former graduate students, Charles C. Fries, brought together a panel of six outstanding language scholars to answer three questions: 1. What should the English teacher know about the English language? 2. Do the usual college courses in Old English, Historical Grammar, and Chaucer give prospective English teachers an adequate introduction to the language? 3. Has linguistic scholarship any practical help to offer in the problem of teaching correct English?

In the distant perspective of nearly sixty years Fries's early leadership in thus enlisting the support of these scholars was indeed portentous. Himself a scholar as well as a teacher, Fries was already beginning a distinguished career in the Council, one marked by insistence upon continued research in the living language, upon providing teachers with knowledge of the grammar of that language, and upon making that grammar the basis of the language concepts and attitudes to be taught in the schools.

During the next three years Fries followed through by recruiting for the College Section such speakers as Hans Kurath, who was to become the nation's leading dialectologist, W. A. Craigie, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary and of the Historical Dictionary of AmericanEnglish, Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield, the nation's two greatest linguists, Thomas A. Knott, editor of the Merriam-Webster Second New International Dictionary, and Sterling Andrus Leonard, who soon was to produce his influential NCTE monograph, Current English Usage. Their topics were straws in the wind that, in 1928, brought to the Council the significant report of its Committee on English Language Training for Teachers.

This programmatic statement sought a specific means for bringing about a gradual replacement of current language myths by a scientific spproach to the language. It described the preparation of an English teacher as desirably including "adequate study of the historical development of English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary," but it continued with a revolutionary declaration that "a knowledge of the principles of general inguistics is of greater value to the teacher of English than a knowledge of the history of the language."

Now, unique as this committee report was in Council history, its substance was not officially accepted until 1951, twenty=three years later, when at the annual business meeting Fries's resolution was adopted: "The NCTE supports the scientific study of the English language, and, realizing the importance of the results of that study in freeing our teaching from wasteful and harmful practices, recommends that, in the training of teachers, both prospective and in service, opportunities be provided to acquaint them with the principles, methods, results, and applications of modern linguistic science. // Furthermore, the NCTE believes that the schools should teach those forms of the English language which sound descriptive research has shown to be the practice of Standard English in the United States."

To language scholars these statements were cogent and persuasive. But they called for what was tantamount to an about-face in teacher preparation. They encountered massive resistance. To ascertain the possible effect of the 1928 statement, Fries in 1935 enabled one of his graduate students to use an NCTE grant in making a national survey of the language component in English teacher preparation. The 373 responding institutions reported a thoroughly unsatisfactory situation. Fewer than half of them offered anything like what the committee had considered requisite. But the 1951 resolution, along with a number of supportive articles in Councils, presumptively should have improved that situation. To find out whether that improvement had actually occurred, in 1962 I replicated my earlier survey. During that quarter of a century the situation had indeed shown some improvement, but it still was generally unsatisfactory. The results, summarized in the Council's monograph

The National Interest and the Teaching of English revealed that of the 569 responding institutions fewer than 100 were graduating prospective English teachers with even minimal information about modern language study, and only seventeen percent required a course in Modern English Grammar.

Clearly, certification of teachers was an area calling for Council leadership. The efforts of Autrey Nell Wiley, Eugene Slaughter, and Donald Tuttle gave a strong impetus to the drive for higher standards of certification in the several states. with specific attention to the language component. Year by year, improvement has occurred, and the process of standard-raising is continuing. It needs to, for I suspect that a survey made today would show that as a whole there is still inadequate preparation, particularly with respect to the language preparation of teachers in the elementary schools.

In the meantime the particular polarity between the grammatical rules and the new descriptive statements about language use had precipitated an oftentimes sharp conflict that some of us recall as the Battle of Usage. Fries's 1927 article, "The rules of the common school grammars," was followed in 1933 by the effective Leonard report, Current English Usage, and then in 1938 by the Marckwardt-Walcott monograph, Facts About Current English Usage. A year later Porter Perrin, a future Council president, broke the publishing barrier with the first college textbook based upon linguistic principles, The Index to Usage, courageously published by Scott, Foresman & Co. Ultimately some high school textbooks accepted the scientific attitude toward usage, albeit grudgingly, as did a few more college textbooks, but even today there are still elementary textbooks in the language arts field that yield to market demands by repeating the myths of Latinate school grammar . The battle has not yet been won. Publishers cannot be held entirely responsible, for they must publish what will sell, and many teachers are reluctant to accept change. They like the status quo, that is, the set of language statements they had inherited. Can the Council break that vicious circle? If so, the break must come in the preparation of the elementary teacher.

Within these few minutes it is impossible to present even a synopsis of the long and increasingly complicated involvement of the Council in the teaching of the English language. I have therefore focused deliberately upon early revolutionary days in English language teaching and their effects. There have been more recent and better known polarities, of course, but because they are better known I now simply name them as reminders of the fact that many chapters, nay, even an entire book, could be written about them.

One polarity developed with the subject-matter itself, that between traditional grammar and descriptive grammar, on the one hand, and the drastically different transformational-generative grammar of Noam Chomsky and his followers, on the other. Further polarities

arose because of social and political pressures upon the profession as a whole. One is between the status quo and the demand for unequivocal acceptance of Black Vernacular English as expressed in the position paper and resolution of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, "The Students' Right to their Own Language." Another is that between the status quo and the demand for non-sexist lexical and pronominal use. A third is that between the orthodox status quo of classroom language teaching and the demand to adjust teaching to the presence of students for whom English is not the first language.

These and other language polarities inevitably are expanding and strengthening the awareness of the need for greater sophistication with respect to knowledge of language theory and its applications in the field of English teaching. I sincerely believe that you and I can look forward with moderate confidence to what some of my younger colleagues might prefer to designate as language-consciousness-raising in the life of the National Council of Teachers of English.

This paper was presented at the convention of the National Council of Teachers of English in Washington, D.C., November 21, 1982.